

House Carfax

passage into horror



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GHOST WRITER

by T. A. Freeman

It's twilight, and I haven't much time. When the darkness comes, so will they. And then I don't know what will happen.

Maybe you know me, my name's Justin Allan Block. Or maybe you know me by several pseudonyms. Maybe you've read a few of my stories but forgot my name. It's easy to forget my name. I do it all the time. Especially since **they** started coming. But it doesn't really matter anymore because I think that pretty soon there won't be any room left for Justin Block.

I write stories about vampires, green one-eyed monsters, and things that go bump in the night. At least I used to. That is, those stories were mine at one time, created by my own imagination. Ever since I was a kid everyone said I had a warped mind, the mind of a horror fiction writer. That was then. My imagination left me a year ago. Of course I still write, but it's not my stuff anymore. They tell me what to write and I write it. But this isn't a horror story, it's my story. You may not like it and you may think I'm crazy. But no matter what you think, I'm going to tell you anyway before they make me forget, or worse.

I started this writing business when I was 14 years old. I wasn't very good at it, but I learned as I got older. By the time I was 17 I had published my first short story in *Amazing*. I remember running through the house like a maniac when I received that acceptance letter. Boy, what a kick. My mom took that letter and showed it to all the neighbors, telling them that her son was now a big time writer. Then she framed it and hung it in the living room. The fact that my dad did a little freelance writing on the side helped me a lot. He was so proud of me. I remember the sparkle in his blue eyes that day.

Anyway, I wrote some more and got published some more. Fifteen years has gone by since that first pub. In that time there's been a few anthologies, a couple of novels, and a couple of short story collections. I wasn't really that good, or at least I didn't think so. I simply wrote about the stuff in my head, the things nightmares are made of. But I

started getting a little famous anyway. A lot of people liked what I had to say. The advance and royalty checks got bigger, and helped to pay the rent so I could spend more time writing, and that's all that really mattered anyway.

Some writers say that when they write about a character it has to come to life in their minds, almost as though it was a real person or thing. Some of those same writers give their creations a complete history, complete physical descriptions, even though they may not use all that info in their story. I've done it myself.

I know what you're thinking. You think I've made my nightmares come to life in my head, that I've written too much weird shit and now I'm eligible for a free padded suite at the county nut house. Well, you're wrong. At least half wrong. It's not my monsters that come to visit me at night. It's the ones created by other writers. And they're not a figment of my overworked imagination either. Oh no. They're real alright. Real flesh and blood and scales and talons, or whatever. You can bet your family jewels on that. But I haven't the time to try to convince you. You're just going to have to take it at ace value right now. I gotta hurry if I'm gonna get this written by sundown, when they come back.

About a year ago I started getting these headaches. Not real bad ones, just bothersome. Off-the-shelf painkillers only numbed the throbbing between my ears and I couldn't concentrate on what I was doing. They kept getting worse as time went on. It felt like something was growing in my head and wanted out real bad. At the same time, my agent started hounding me because the publisher was on his back about getting a novel finished which I had received a hefty advance on. I had no choice but to find out what was going on with me.

So I went to the doctor and after a couple of weeks of testing, he gave me the news. I remember he acted real sorry when he told me about this rare brain tumor. But I had a chance, it was a small tumor, he said, and maybe they could fry it with this new type of radiation treatment. So for two months I went in twice a week and got zapped.

They say it worked. I'm not so sure. Oh yeah, the headaches left but in their place I got *them*. Don't ask me which I'd rather have.

Maybe it was the tumor, or maybe it was the treatment. Or the combination of both caused it. I don't know how it works, or why.

But for some reason I became a receiver, a lightning rod attracting characters created from other writers' minds. I heard once that energy can't be destroyed, only altered. Maybe all that energy minds use to make creatures has to go somewhere, and right now that somewhere is to me.

They come during the time that used to be my best writing hours: after dark. They come after sunset and leave before sunrise. And they talk, the ones that can, the ones created with vocal chords, the ones that have flesh left on their bones, or mouths to speak with. They tell me what to write. And I have to listen, no matter what they say.

I get them all, the greatest of the great monsters and the lesser knowns. Most of them I haven't even heard of; the ones created in the small presses and fiction magazines around the world. There's so many I can't keep track of them all. My house is full of them, overflowing, standing room only, milling around with their rotted flesh, red eyes, boils, forked tongues, tuxedos, claws, double heads, fangs, whatever. They're backed out onto the front drive, and the garden out back. They walk and slither, crawl and lope, squirm and ooze to my door. They're all here with me, every night, all night. And I write what they tell me to. I can't do it fast enough because they have so much to tell.

So they aren't mine, you see. The stories I've been writing for the past year. The stories belong to them. The stories about other dimensions they've been in, the other creatures they've seen that have yet to be created. My hands are tired from typing and so's the rest of me. I don't know how much longer I can hold out. If I stop writing for them I don't know what they'll do.

It's dark now. I have to go because I hear them coming. They're scratching at my door and windows, wanting in, wanting to tell me their stories.

I've gotten used to most of them, but each day I'm afraid of what some other writer will come up with. Something that's *really* hard to get along with. Something so scary it'll burn my eyes right out of their sockets. Maybe I could send some of them your way so you would believe me. I don't know if they'll listen but I'll ask. Then you'll see. You'll know what it's like to have them knocking at your door, scrambling over each other to get to you so you can write their stories. Oh yeah, you'll see alright.



This space reserved for:

Letters to the Editor

Tell us what you think about:

HC's stories, art work, poetry

America's Horror Direction

Anything Horrific!

We welcome ALL letters to the editor

Write and tell us, or tell us off—at:

**Letters to the editor
HOUSE CARFAX MAGAZINE
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SOJOURNERS

A Love Story

by Sidney Williams

Steve was driving Brad Hawkins crazy. The guy was easy to take in small doses, but three or four hours in a car with him was like a stint in Purgatory with an irritating demon as a turnkey.

Now he was pretending to be a news reporter, miming a microphone. "I'm going to attempt to get the driver's attention," Steve said, leaning over to thrust the imaginary mike into Brad's face. "Steve Arbor, On The Spot News. I'm here in the middle of nowhere with our driver Brad 'I know a shortcut' Hawkins. Sir, could you comment on the rumor that this automobile is totally lost?"

"We're not lost," Brad said. "We're misplaced."

"Thank you for those interesting comments."

He moved back and began to give a running description of the passing countryside, mostly pine trees. At least while he was doing that Brad could concentrate on driving. He kept hoping for a road sign. It was getting dark, and he really didn't have a good idea of where they were.

Sooner or later, though, something would come into sight, a 7-11 or a Dairy Queen. He knew he hadn't driven off the edge of the world or anything. The pine trees meant they were still in Louisiana.

It was Christmas time, and they were on their way home from Baton Rouge where they attended the state university.

Brad had never met Steve before college, but he was from Pineville, just across the river from Brad's hometown. Since Steve had no car, they'd bundled everything into Brad's Firebird. He'd felt sorry for the guy in a way. He was nice enough, but he was hyperactive and didn't have many friends. He was nice looking enough to be above a nerd classification, but he still seemed lonely.

Brad was looking forward to dumping his passenger. They couldn't be that far from home, if he could just find the right road. Something Steve said snapped him back to attention.

"Was that a sputter I heard?"

It was indeed, Brad had to admit. At least, it started as a sputter. It progressed into a rattle-rasp, coming from under the hood. Cursing, he jerked the car onto the road's gravel shoulder and pulled a flashlight from the console. Steve got out of the car with him. They opened the hood together to peer down into the bowels of the engine.

"What's wrong?" Steve asked.

"The rubber band broke."

"Well, this is such a well-traveled road you picked, there should be another car along in five or six months."

"The distributor cap."

"What about it?"

"It isn't distributing."

"Oooo. And it's going to be dark soon." Steve raised his hands and hooked them like claws. "You want to see something really scary?"

"Enough already." Brad got his keys out of the ignition and moved around to the trunk. He shoved things around without finding the bag he was looking for.

"You never gave back my tool kit," he said.

"Slipped my mind," Steve confessed.

"Great. What are we supposed to do now?"

Steve shrugged. "Do you think we ought to stay with the car?"

"Why? Do you think it's going to get better?" he asked sarcastically.

Brad looked through the stand of trees which lined the roadside. A short distance away, back through the leaves he could see some lights blinking, a menagerie of colors which must have been part of a Christmas tree. He nodded toward it.

"Maybe that's a house over there. Maybe we can use their phone."

"Didn't I see this in a John Landis movie?" Steve asked as they pushed through the trees.

"There's no full moon."

"Yeah, but that would be quite a trick on your part." Steve stopped, eyeing Brad skeptically. "I mean, if you were a werewolf. Offering me a ride home. Then pretending to break down."

Steve began to toy with the out-of-date long gold chain around his neck.

"Don't let your imagination go into overdrive," Brad said. "You begged me for a ride, remember? Besides, who talked about having trolls for Christmas dinner for the past thirty miles?"

"It was a whim," Steve said, but he seemed to relax, and they started walking again.

The house didn't look like a typical hermit's abode. It was a neat little structure built of rustic-looking stone. The Christmas tree twinkled through the front window like a beacon in the darkness.

A narrow trail twisted off from the far side of the house, stretching in a semi-circle back through the trees to provide access to the highway.

"Looks lived in," Brad said.

"By Dr. Moreau."

"No it doesn't," Brad said. Damn, this guy had an imagination. All literature majors were strange. That was all there was to it, and to cap it off, Steve was in theater too. Now Brad was a business major - something practical.

Moving up to the front door, he knocked.

"Probably some gnarled hermit in there," Steve said.

When he saw the girl who came to the door, he said, "I've been wrong before." She had dark hair and a smooth, oval face. She was dressed in a white sweater and jeans and looked like she belonged in front of a fireplace at a ski lodge.

She smiled. Nice lips, Brad thought.

"Let me guess," she said. "Your car broke down." Brad nodded.

"And you need to use the phone?" Brad nodded again.

"I'm afraid I don't have one."

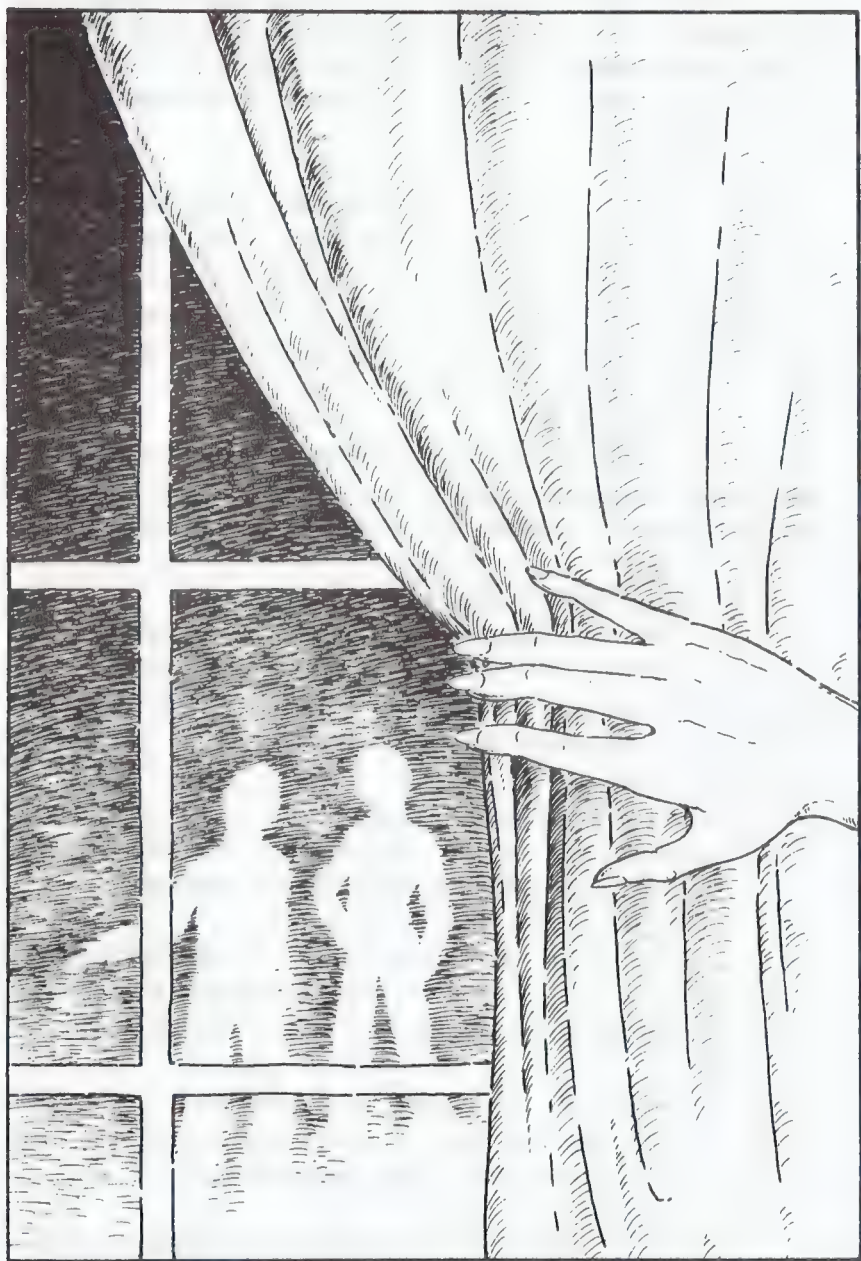
Brad angled his head so the light from the house could catch the twinkle in his blue eyes. "Maybe we could send a letter for help."

She smiled again and wrinkled her nose. "Sounds reasonable. Come on in."

They went into the living room. It was small but warm, with a fireplace to one side, logs ablaze. Across the room there were some thick draperies and a small desk with a typewriter on it.

"I'm Miranda," she said.

"Ah," Steve said. "I'm Trunculo and this is Caliban. Have you seen Ariel?"



Brad took Steve's hat off and swatted him with it. "I'm Brad and this is my faithful Indian companion, Chemotherapy."

"Steve," Steve corrected.

"Nice to meet you," Miranda said. "I guess you guys could use some coffee."

"Sure," Brad said. "I'll help you fix it."

"Don't mind me," Steve said. "I'll wait here."

The kitchen was a neat little room. Brad watched Miranda dump some coffee into a filter and slide it into the Mr. Coffee. "What are you doing out here in the middle of nowhere?" he asked.

"Working on a master's thesis. It's nice and quiet here."

"Tell me about it. It's hell working on papers when you live next door to the court jester in there."

She laughed. There was something about her. She was slender, and her eyes had a warm look, perhaps hinting a spark somewhere behind them. For a second or so, their gazes met, a prolonged and silent inquiry.

"It's kind of a clear night," she said. "You guys aren't going anywhere. Would you like to take a walk?"

"Sure."

She switched off the coffee maker, and together they slipped through the kitchen door.

In the living room, Steve got tired of holding down the couch. He moved around the room. He always found it difficult to sit still for very long. Hands in the pockets of his jeans, he looked around. When he stuck his head into the empty kitchen, he pursed his lips. "Great. Empty."

He strolled back into the living room and nosed around in the desk. Some pages were stacked beside the Smith Corona.

Slipping the cover sheet to one side, he scanned the first few lines, then frowned. The girl hadn't looked like a physics major, but the thing appeared to be a treatise on dimensional crossovers.

He rolled his eyes around in his head. Dimensional crossovers? He read a few more lines.

"Uh, oh."

He noticed the draperies - thick blue curtains of what looked like crushed velvet. He pulled them aside, and found that they concealed an array of aged books. Steve gasped. It was a theatrical gasp, but he did feel surprised as he ran his finger along the spines of the volumes.

They were leather bound and musty with titles in diverse languages. Some he recognized and some were so obscure he speculated they were unique editions. Slipping one of the volumes off the shelf, he flipped through it. A loose sheet fluttered out.

It was a line drawing, depicting an amulet - an ornate figure with an odd-looking jewel at its center. Bending lower, he examined it. He slammed his fist down. Something was very wrong here.

Brad and Miranda sat beneath a tree looking up at the stars. Away from city lights, the heavens were more visible, a vast array of twinkling eyes, not as colorful as the Christmas lights, but far more awesome.

"Look at it," Miranda said. "Infinity."

Brad looked at Miranda instead.

"Just think of it," she said. "Other creatures. Other worlds."

"I suppose it's a big universe," Brad said. He was still tracing her curves with his eyes. He was interested in occupied space.

Back at the cabin, Steve settled onto the couch once again. He wasn't sure what he should do, but he was definitely uncomfortable. He kept running his hands through his hair and shifting his weight.

This evening was turning into something he'd never counted on. Maybe he was letting his imagination run away with him just like Brad had said, but this was a weird world. Things happened. Strange things.

Leaning toward her, Brad kissed Miranda gently on her cheek, hoping he wasn't being too forward. He waited for her to slap his face. Instead she turned to him, and he saw that gleam was still in her eyes. It was interesting. He kept looking at her.

He didn't see her bringing her hand around; failed to notice it wasn't a hand anymore, but a twisted appendage spiked with nails and a covering of scales.

He never knew what bit him.

Steve knew when the girl came back alone his fears had been accurate. It wasn't in the way she looked. She was still neat, beautiful really. Her hair was in place, her face undaunted, but he spotted the gleam in her eyes.

She gave him a simple smile, a "Why-do-you-have-that-look-on-your-face?" smile.

He got up off the couch. "Don't give me that," he said.

"What?"

"I know what's going on."

"Nothing's going on."

From beneath his sweater, Steve slipped the amulet which hung from the gold chain around his neck. It was just like the one in the picture. Just like, he suspected, the one she had under her sweater.

She began to laugh.

"What's so funny?" he demanded.

"I didn't realize. I'm sorry. He was to be your kill? Did you work hard to set it up?"

"A whole semester. I had to fake an identity, get a ride with him, and rig his car to break down."

"I really am sorry."

"Yeah? It's so easy for females."

"Don't worry. Lots of people get lost and stop here."

"Is that why you're here?"

"I'm trying to get home."

"Why?"

"Don't you find it lonely here. Without your own kind?"

"It's rough sometimes, but I crossed the void alone into this realm. You have to be careful in the captures, but I tolerate it. There's the art, music, even the movies. So much the humans take for granted."

"But I came with a Companion. Some redneck shot him with a silver bullet. Their legends can be a real nuisance."

"I suppose. It calls for precautions." He scowled.

"If I'd known you planned to take his life essence..."

"Sure. You'd have shared."

"Look, someone else will be along here. Look at the bright side."

"What?"

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She moved to him, embracing him. "At least we don't have to spend Christmas alone."

His face brightened. Loneliness had plagued him since he'd crossed the void, even if there were consolations among the humans.

"I've been waiting a long time to find someone else from the other side. I've felt so empty," she said, kissing him gently.

He heard her murmur something, then realized what she'd said. It was a quote.

"Ah, brave new world that has such creatures in it." Shakespeare. Maybe she wasn't such a bad girl after all.



HAMNEIL'S DEMISE

by Watson C. Smith

It has been six weeks since the death of David Hamneil. I was present for the funeral, but was not allowed a final glimpse of my friend. It was a closed coffin ceremony.

It was probably for the best, considering the way he passed on. Ironic that the man who was known as the Mad-Hacker of Almaden would take his own life by eating an entire personal computer. He might have survived if it was a lap-top, but instead, he devoured an IBM clone, with add-on circuit boards, so death was instantaneous.

At the time of his death, Hamneil was on the verge of finishing his greatest project, an English translation of the bizarre MACRO-COMICA. Over 6000 years old, its strange italics baffled linguists and anthropologists alike, until 1987, when Hamneil made the mind-shattering discovery that the language was in fact, Pig Latin. Two years later, he had managed to translate the entire 12,000,000-page codex and was on the verge of finishing the final chapter, when for some unknown reason, he took his own life in the strange way as previously told.

Unknown, that is, until recently, when I received a letter from Hamneil. By the postmark, he had mailed it the day before his deathday. Opening the letter, I read the following message that he wrote:

Dear Durendal: When this letter reaches you, I might be gone. I must, however, warn you of what I found out so you can try to find a way of escaping your fate.

The final chapter is a prophecy. It reads as follows:

One day in the year of the Gnat, when the nights are longer, the Keeper of Time and the Dread Tique-Toque Devon shall vie for the possession of the Chosen One, He who lives in the world of Persons. That One whose name is Dur-'en/'dal will either join the forces of law and order or will be One with the Forces of Chaos.

WARNING! Who so ever translates these words will suffer a death that is totally dumb and asinine. So be warned!

You might think this is nonsense Jon, but hear me out. I checked the books and the year of the Gnat is 1990. Also, the part about the nights being longer obviously means the fall season, so it's possible that this really could happen. I would tell you more but for some strange reason, I feel very hungry. I'll put this in the mailbox down the street, then I'm going to have a snack...

DAVID HAMNEIL

So you see, I have a problem. I really don't know what to do about this. It could just be a fantasy created by Hamneil's warped mind. On the other hand, it could be real.

Right now, I'm sitting in my living room listening to the roaring fire and the steady ticking of the clock.

Wait a minute. My clock is digital.



THE FACE OF HORROR

An Evening With Clive Barker

by Joan C. Schramm

(From an HC interview, first published in 1988)

Have you seen the Face of Horror lately?

It looks like a grotesque angular troll with his shriveled lips sewn up. Or it's a grizzled old man with droopy eyes, stubble on his sunken cheeks, a moustache of long tiger whiskers, hair bristles covering his body, and an X at the center of his forehead. And of course, it's the face of a blank-eyed zombie with heat vapors rising from his hollowed-out skull.

But it's also the face of the popular boys' camp counselor, the one all the junior girls giggle over. It looks like that too-clean new boy in school whom the head cheerleader has targeted to meet Mom and Dad. It's the face of the young magazine salesman who knocks on your door and says he's working his way through college - and you believe him.

And it's the face of Rawhead Rex, Jacqueline Ess, the Yattering and Jack, Mamouliau, Dread, and other exquisitely horrible nightmares.

The Face of Horror is all these things, because the Face of Horror is Clive Barker. And Clive Barker is all these things, and more.

Recently, on a balmy autumn night in a Berkeley, California bookstore, our horror group, HOUSE CARFAX, got an exclusive interview with Clive Barker. We found a warm, engaging, generous, even playful Clive Barker.

Confession time: As avid Barker readers, we were very familiar with his "literary" face, and had studied and discussed his style ad nauseam. But I personally had never really noticed his physical face, the one so common on jacket covers, or in newspapers. Never wanted a poster of him on my wall, because his face could never reflect the genius of his words. To paraphrase a caption under a portrait of Shakespeare, I looked not on his picture, but on his book. Consequently, I came ill-prepared to recognize him, in the flesh, so to speak.

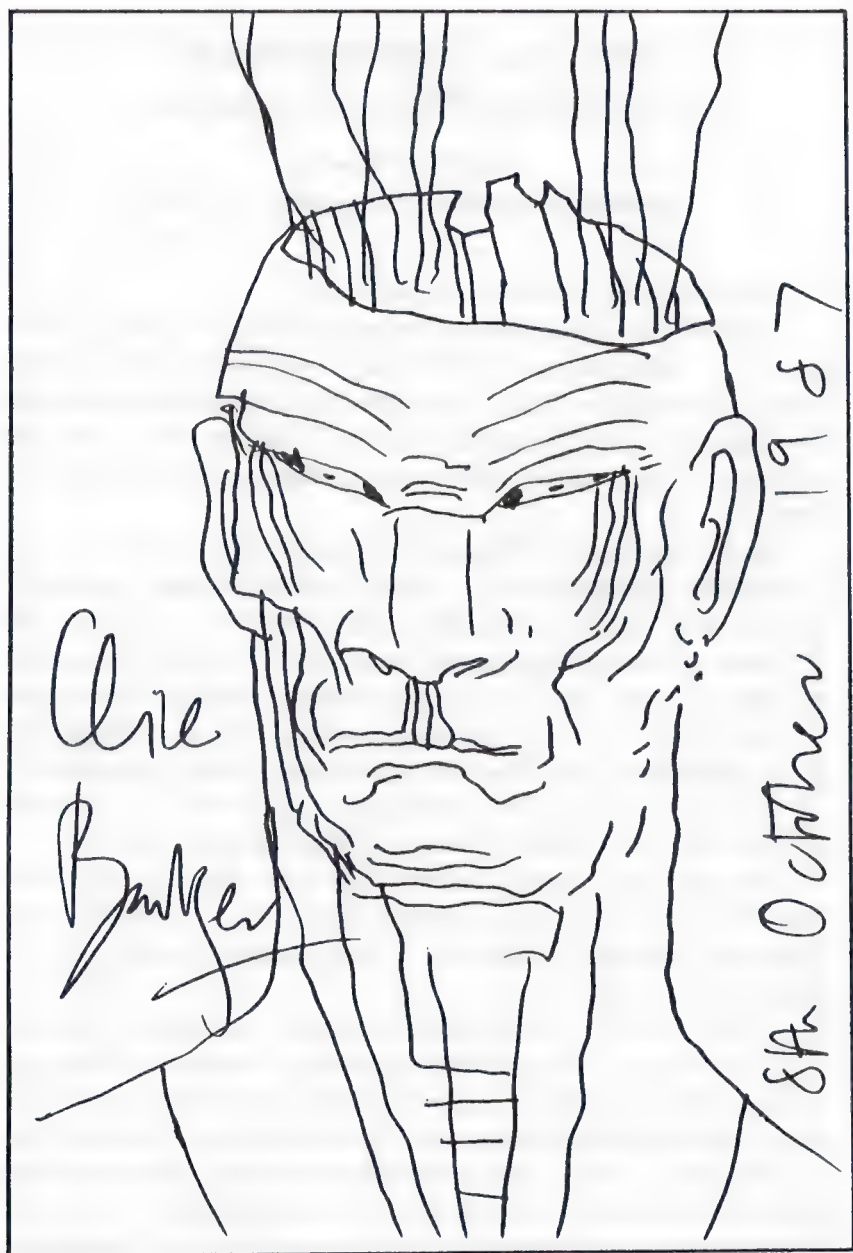


Illustration by Clive Barker

As to this author-on-tour roadshow: He'll read from his latest book, *WEAVEWORLD*, smile patiently to his fans, autograph their books, and bye, thanks for your support. But it didn't start - or end - that way.

We'd walked in late. About 70 people were already seated in the book-lined library room. A well-dressed woman stood at the podium, speaking. Because of the scattered vacant seats, *HOUSE CARFAX* members couldn't sit together, at least not until the mad rush for autographs. So we split up, with one of us ending up in front, next to an empty chair.

Against the wall facing the audience, seated on a small metal folding chair, was a friendly-looking kid wearing jeans and a rumpled dark shirt. He was leaning his elbows on his knees, sipping from a Coke can, and casually looking around. The HC member spotted the empty chair in front, caught his eye, and asked silently,

"OK to sit here?"

The kid, probably a chair-folder, laughed and waved his hand casually towards the empty chair. So HC sat, in time to see the woman turn towards the wall, extend her arm towards the now grinning chair-folder, and introduce Clive Barker.

He ambled over to the podium, made some easy comments about life in America, and began reading from *WEAVEWORLD* in a mellow, even voice lightly dipped in Cockney. But when he got to the dialog, he stopped and explained that since the characters were from another part of England, he'd have to change the accent, and began reading in a rough, loud, familiar Liverpool garble. He read like an actor, with body, hand, and head movements that drew his listeners in to the written scene. After seeing that, it was easy to believe he wrote plays.

When he was finished, he welcomed the audience to come up if they wished, to autograph whatever they had. He said it without a hint of patronizing, arrogance, or conceit, but with the warmth, charm and class of a right proper English gentleman.

And so began the hours of audience attention - and look at the gifts he brought! As though *he* weren't enough! That quirky and disturbing figure - reprinted facing page - is but a sample of what he drew in each fan's book, with personal greeting, while he joked and answered countless questions.

His outwardly handsome, wholesome appearance belies what his fans admire him for - the disturbing, unflinching horror he creates so well. Is that why this figure is so fascinating? Does it serve as a glimpse into the window of his mind - that same imagination that gave birth to the quality of horror that fans only dreamed about? Well, dream no more, my lovelies, he seems to say. And does say, even during conversations that seem to be routine, like this quick exchange while he drew in a fan's book:

Fan: Are you married?

Barker: No.

Fan: Wanna meet my sister?

Barker: Is she alive?

The crowd chuckled, unruffled, because they expected him to turn mundane banter into horror story dialog - because he was Clive Barker.

His works include plays, novels, art work, and the modern horror classic, *BOOKS OF BLOOD*, a series of short, compelling nightmare stories. His latest work is the fantasy novel he came to Berkeley to introduce, *WEAVERWORLD*.

But it's stories like "Midnight Meat Train," "Dread," "Pig's Blood Blues," and "Rawhead Rex" that sing the body horrific, and that drew fans to the Berkeley bookstore.

HOUSE CARFAX was there, and wondered - with all this free-flowing admiration sloshing over him - what advice he had for growing writers who'd like to write horror, but are so intimidated by their admiration for him they won't even try. He answered with the ease and swiftness of a knife slicing through fat flesh.

"I'm intimidated by Ray Bradbury and Herman Melville. But it's okay to be intimidated. Just use it to inspire yourself to do something uniquely your own and call it your own."

Of course, Barker has a lot to call his own - his writing style, and a reputation unmatched in recent times. HC wondered how Barker maintains his level of excellence knowing that his reputation alone can sell his work - in other words, Clive, "How do you write when people have already called you the Future of Horror?"

"I ignore it. I block it out and just write for myself."

Barker's movie, *HELLRAISER*, also displays this uniqueness - he wrote and directed it. Does he like the final cut?

"Oh, yes. I'm very pleased with the result."

Then he dove into the answer with a vengeance.

"Your American style of censorship is very funny. When we finished a sex scene, we sent it to our distributor, New World, here in the U.S. How did they like it? 'Oh, fabulous!' they said. 'But we can't use it. Sorry.' And why not? 'Oh, much too strong,' they said. 'MPAA would never pass it.' So what are MPAA guidelines? 'Two consecutive buttock thrusts are okay, Clive. Three are obscene.' "

Then with a wicked gleam in his eyes, he added, "Actually, we had more than three..."

Barker finds easy humor in sex. But when he combines sex with religion, he seems to revel in the challenge, and in playing the provocateur. His story, "Rawhead Rex," is a good example. It's an ultra-violent gorefest in which a young priest feels compelled to become the groveling servant before a pagan god. HC asked Barker why the priest willingly allows Rawhead to humiliate him.

"Why else would someone become a priest unless they like to kneel and be pissed on?"

His stories repeat the haunting theme of fear, or even death, in sex. HC asked if fear and sex weren't really two sides of the same coin. His easy smile faded.

"Definitely. Do you know what the French call that time immediately after lovemaking? *Petite mort*."

Someone said quietly, "That means 'little death' doesn't it?"

He fixed on her gaze for a few seconds, and said, "That's right." He went on signing books for his now subdued fans. Point made.

Then he cut the gloom with a chuckle. "That's why 'Age of Desire' is one of my favorite BOOKS OF BLOOD stories. It goes too far."

Some critics believe Barker "goes too far" with his horror descriptions, but his readers and fellow writers keep reading. Barker has proved that he knows just how far to go for the right effect: the funny effect or the fright effect.

After the reading, HC members had to pass another horror bookstore - Dark Carnival - to get back to the car. Dark Carnival was the first stop that night on Barker's bookstore tour. Walking past Dark Carnival about 11:30 that night, we noticed the lights on, though the glass door was closed. One of the organizers of Barker's tour was in

the front, putting books away. We stopped, and one of us shouted through the locked door, "Hey, thanks for inviting him. It worked out great! He's so helpful, and very funny, and treated us like old friends! Really generous with his time. Gave us a great interview!"

She smiled, quickly looked to the side out of our range and mouthed to us, "What did he say?"

We were still on the Barker high, and so eager to talk about our memorable encounter. We didn't talk, we gushed. "Oh, he was great. He told us his favorite stories, who his heroes are, and...and..."

In the middle of our accolade, an impish, moronically grinning face leaned into view at the side of the glass door and posed there, frozen in that ghastly grin. It was Barker. Listening all the time. To the gushing. How humiliating. How hysterical.

And so caught up in his unexpected appearance, we roared with him at his own joke. Walking away, we wondered if all horror writers were so playful, and respectful at the same time. He didn't have to show us he was there.

But had he gotten angry during our bookstore interview? Ah, yes, but just a little.

We mentioned a recent *Fangoria* interview in which prolific horror writer/editor Charles Grant worried that Barker might be overextending himself in his artistic activities - plays, short stories, novels, scriptwriter and director. He's afraid Barker is spreading his talents too thin, and will burn out before his time.

HC asked Barker about Grant's remark. Barker's response was fun to watch. He spit on both palms, as though preparing for a fist fight, rubbed his hands together in mock menace, leaned forward and asked rhetorically, "Do you know how many pseudonyms Grant has?"

Again he'd made his point with a pointed question.

Noticing the late hour, and almost everyone gone, he announced brightly, "We'd better go. They'll lock us in."

He strode towards the door with our little group following him out, until someone said hopefully, "We could sit around and tell ghost stories."

Clive Barker stopped, turned slowly and looked at each person there.

"And what stories we could tell..."



RANGE MEDITATION

Floating gently and soft
Warmly surrounded in comfortable light
Pictures of you ease slowly through my mind.
Like pop-up targets at the range!
CRACK! the pistol jumps in my hands
Spitting fire, lead, and death from the muzzle
A look of surprised shock crosses your face
As your right shoulder is driven
Backwards and upwards

CRACK! CRACK!

My next two shots hit you in the chest
Falling backwards, unable to stop
You land sprawled out among
The blood and shards of bone and flesh
You try to ask WHY?, but the blood
Gurgles up from your lungs and you choke.
But I understand...

Because I love you.

by D. R. Ridenhour

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KING CONG

by Ronald Kelly

He wanted to hear a war story. Because he was such good company and I was in a talkative mood that stormy night, I obliged him.

God forgive me...I told that poor guy one helluva war story.

His name was Gary. I met him in Atlanta. Since we were both hiking north, we decided to join ranks; it was safer than traveling alone. Our second night found us on the banks of a Tennessee river amid a violent thunderstorm. Soaked to the skin, we soon found a convenient overhang under a limestone cliff and camped there for the night. I built a fire and we shared a beer and a can of pork and beans I had stashed in my pack.

Our conversation wandered from one subject to another. When my stint in Vietnam surfaced, he took the information rather matter-of-factly. He did not react like some of the others I had bummed around with over the years, those who either developed a gruesome interest or a sudden case of the nervous jitters, depending on what their general opinions or prejudices of Nam vets were at the time. Also, he did not ask the three dreaded questions: How many gooks did you kill?, Did you murder innocent women and children? and How does it feel to kill another human being? No, we simply talked of my involvement in the Southeast Asian conflict for a while, and then he asked to hear the most bizarre story I had of the war.

I didn't have to think about that for very long. The wet whistle of the wind and the low rumble of distant thunder enhanced the dark mood as I told my tale like a man recalling a disturbing, all-too-familiar nightmare.

"I was just your basic grunt over there in Nam," I began. Pretty well stationed throughout my stay in the Highlands in Northern Vietnam. Nothing but freaking mountains everywhere you looked. My unit was assigned to permanent search 'n destroy. We'd hump the mountains for weeks on end and never see a sign of Charlie. He was there, though, watching us, and we knew it. That's what made it so damned

bad. A lot of good men died up there in the Highlands and never knew where the hell it was coming from. I'd heard that the Viet Cong had close to two hundred miles of tunnels dug underground north of Saigon. Who knows, maybe they had the same set-up there in the Central Highlands.

"There was one guy we knew of up there in the mountains that had gained quite a reputation for guerrilla warfare. We called him King Cong. You know how most orientals are kinda short and wiry? Well, old Cong was just the opposite. He was a big mother...well over six and a half feet and about 300 pounds; a blasted giant compared to the other Charlies. Only a couple of our guys had ever seen him and, then, only fleetingly. They said he had shoulders on him that would have shamed Arnold Schwarzenegger. And arms so powerful they could snap a small sapling in half with a twist of the wrist.

"The Vietnamese sent him out prowling at night, while we were sacked out. He'd get himself a grunt or two a night, but he'd never use a knife or garotte. Just his bare hands. Old Cong would sneak down from the mountains, decked out in his black pajamas and bamboo sandals, and he would hump around the boonies looking for us. When he found a unit camped out in a valley, he'd usually take out the man on watch, or just waste the poor slob sacked out nearest the jungle.

"Cong would just snake those brawny arms out of the brush and bamboo and wrap his hands around the nearest neck. One sharp twist would usually do it. *CRACK!* The noise would sound like a freaking Claymore going off! We'd leap up and cover the perimeter...all except one of us. Cong's victim would be sprawled out across his rucksack, his head cocked at an unnatural angle. You could tell he was dead by just looking at him. Cong's hands had done their dirty work. Either he broke their neck in several places or dislocated their skull from the spine. Reckon it didn't matter much which way it was done."

The grim tale seemed to dampen our desire for conversation, but it was just as well. We were both bone-tired from walking all day and it was getting late. The fire died and the southern storm raged overhead. Quietly, we retired for the night; Gary crawled into a dry corner of the overhang, I took the other. As I propped my head atop my knapsack, my thoughts remained on the gruesome story from my past, despite my attempts to dwell on something else. Sleep came fitfully. Before long, the troubled images of my mind invaded my dreams.

A sound woke me. My heart pounding, I stared tensely into total darkness. The sound...had it been the brittle crack of a branch underfoot or something much more sinister. My muscles ached as I strained to turn my head to the side, to survey the small clearing where my unit had bedded down for the night.

I choked back a gasp. My buddies, men who were closer to me than brothers, laid in a semi-circle; their bodies twisted, their heads cocked at odd angles. They were dead, the entire unit! My eyes inched around the shadowy clearing, searching for the one responsible. The smells and nocturnal sounds of the jungle assaulted my senses. Slowly - almost painfully - I reached for my M-16. It was gone.

Low laughter froze the blood in my veins. Someone was standing directly over me! I stared up; it was him! The mighty Cong...his leering face etched with an emotion like sexual pleasure. I attempted to rise, but the strength to do so eluded me. His thick, ape-like fingers brushed the sweaty flesh of my face, then clamped firmly around my neck, his thumbs hooked roughly beneath my ears. I tried to plead for my life, but all I could do was gurgle. Our eyes met for a n instant; mine wide and brimming with fear, his slanted and black like those of a serpent. His powerful hands wrenched sharply to the right. CRACK!

I started up from my blanket, my body bathed in a cold sweat. I gulped great lungfull of the damp Tennessee air. The rain still pelted the air in steady sheets. In the east thunder rolled like a huge stone. Shaking, I crawled to the fire and added a few dry sticks to the coals. A pale, flickering light filled the cramped shelf of rock and slate. I noticed that Gary lay with his arms folded comfortably behind his head. His youthful eyes stared out into the rainy darkness.

"Sorry I woke you, man," I said in embarrassment. "Had a bad dream. Guess that damned story kinda got to me."

Gary said nothing. He just lay there, staring into open space. I felt an awful dread begin to creep into the pit of my gut. It was a dread I hadn't experienced since those long nights back in the Highlands.

Slowly, I crawled on hands and knees to where he lay. Firelight flickered on his open eyes. Glassy, unfocused eyes that did not blink.

Maybe he's having some kind of seizure. I wracked my brain for some logical explanation. But I already knew from personal experience



exactly what was wrong with Gary. I shook his shoulder gently. His head lolled limply to the side, the vertebrae in his neck no longer able to support the weight of his skull.

CONG!

The thought was immediate, but totally irrational. Not here...not *now*. Gary's injury had been caused by something else. Perhaps a boulder had fallen from the ceiling of the overhang. But no tell-tale rock could be found near the body. I sat bundled in my blanket, scared, not knowing what to do next. I forced my mind to rationalize, to form some semblance of responsible thought. *There must be a town somewhere nearby*, I told myself. *You've got to find a town and tell the sheriff. He'll know what to do.* Numbly, trying not to look in Gary's direction, I pulled on my hiking boots. With the blanket fashioned into a poncho, I set out along the dark river bank in the driving rain.

I hadn't gone a quarter of a mile when I heard the heavy crunch of footsteps behind me. I was being followed. I stared over my shoulder into the black tangle of thick woods, but could detect nothing. Still, when I continued along the steep banks of the muddy river, the progress of my pursuer continued also. I *was* being stalked...by who or what I had no earthly idea. Or did I?

I began to walk faster, then run, tearing through the dark thicket and pelting rain like a madman. Blackberry bramble snagged and ripped at my clothing, drew blood along my hands and face. The sounds behind me grew closer - the crunch of footsteps on dead brush, the ragged breathing of someone or *something* trying to keep pace. It must be whoever had murdered Gary in his sleep.

A steep hill rose under my feet. When I climbed it, I found a two-lane highway stretching into the darkness. Twin beams of headlights arched out of the night. I ran toward them, waving my hands frantically. The car slowed, but then sped on. Exhausted, I watched helplessly as the vehicle passed by.

My heartbeat quickened as a huge, dark form reared out of the bordering thicket and walked directly into the path of the oncoming car. For a split second, I caught a glimpse of the thing that had been chasing me: a large, brawny man clad entirely in black. Then the right front fender of the automobile caught him and knocked him sprawling back into the shadowy brush.

The car stopped. A man left the vehicle and ran to the side of the road, perhaps intending to help the fallen man. I opened my mouth to yell a warning, but it was too late. Muscular arms lifted the slight fellow off his feet and snapped his spine with a single, fluid movement. *Cong!* my mind screamed. The motorist was tossed aside like a rag doll.

I ran. For how many miles or how long, I don't know. I left the highway and cut across a cornfield. The stiff leaves slapped me across the face and body, the mud of the evenly furrowed rows sucked at my feet. Behind, I could hear him tearing through the stalks like a beast in the jungle. At any moment I expected him to overtake me, entwining his steel-cable fingers around my fragile neck in that fatal hold.

A faint glow shone over a rise at the edge of the cornfield. I scrambled up the incline, my hands clawing into the muddy clay earth for a solid hold that would haul me upward, over the grassy peak. Down in the field I could hear Cong thrashing through the summer corn. I heard his roar of triumph. He had spotted me. With all the strength I could muster, I reached to top of the rise.

I stumbled, dirty and exhausted, into what seemed like chaos.

It looked as though a train had derailed, a carnival or circus train at that. Brightly painted boxcars lay askew along a twisted track. Police cars and emergency vehicles bathed the scene in spinning shades of red and blue while men checked the buckled car and surveyed the damage. I approached two men in heated discussion.

"Are you sure he's gone?" urged a heavy-set man who appeared to be the county sheriff. A brass badge was pinned haphazardly above his left shirt pocket and a large caliber revolver hung from his hip.

"He's gone alright!" snapped a short fellow. He had a bad gash over one eye. "I searched the whole car. He ain't anywhere, I tell you. He's wandering out loose somewhere. You've gotta find him!"

The sheriff spotted me. Startled, he reached for his gun. "What the hell...!"

I stood speechless, my breath sapped.

Suddenly, the little fellow pointed passed me. "Hey - there he is!"

The sheriff's eyes grew wide. "Lordy Mercy!" He aimed his revolver, a .357 Magnum, straight at my face. *He's gonna kill me!* I thought.

"Get down, son!" the sheriff yelled. "GET DOWN!"

I dropped to my knees as Cong's stubby fingers lightly brushed the back of my neck.

"NO!" cried the little guy. But the sheriff's gun barked, filling the drizzly night with thunder. I looked behind me. I saw a dark form slump into the mud. Blood spurted from his massive black chest as he lay there, thick hands twitching.

Confused, I watched the little fellow run to the fallen attacker. He sat on the wet ground, cradling the thing's huge head. "Kong!" he sobbed. He glared at the lawman. "Look what you've done! You killed him! You killed Kong!"

I did a double-take. "Did you say...*Cong*?"

The little man nodded, and pointed down the hill to the jumble of overturned cars. One had a brightly painted depiction of a male gorilla on its broad side with the bold words THE MIGHTY KONG emblazoned overhead.

I stared, dumbfounded, at the great, snarling face of the bull ape, his dark hands reaching menacingly between painted bars. I began to laugh. *Of course*, I thought. *That was the only thing it could have been. The only logical explanation...*

The carnival owner caressed the beast's thick-skinned face. With tears in his eyes, he tugged at the furry throat, and seemed to be pulling down *of all things!* a zipper.

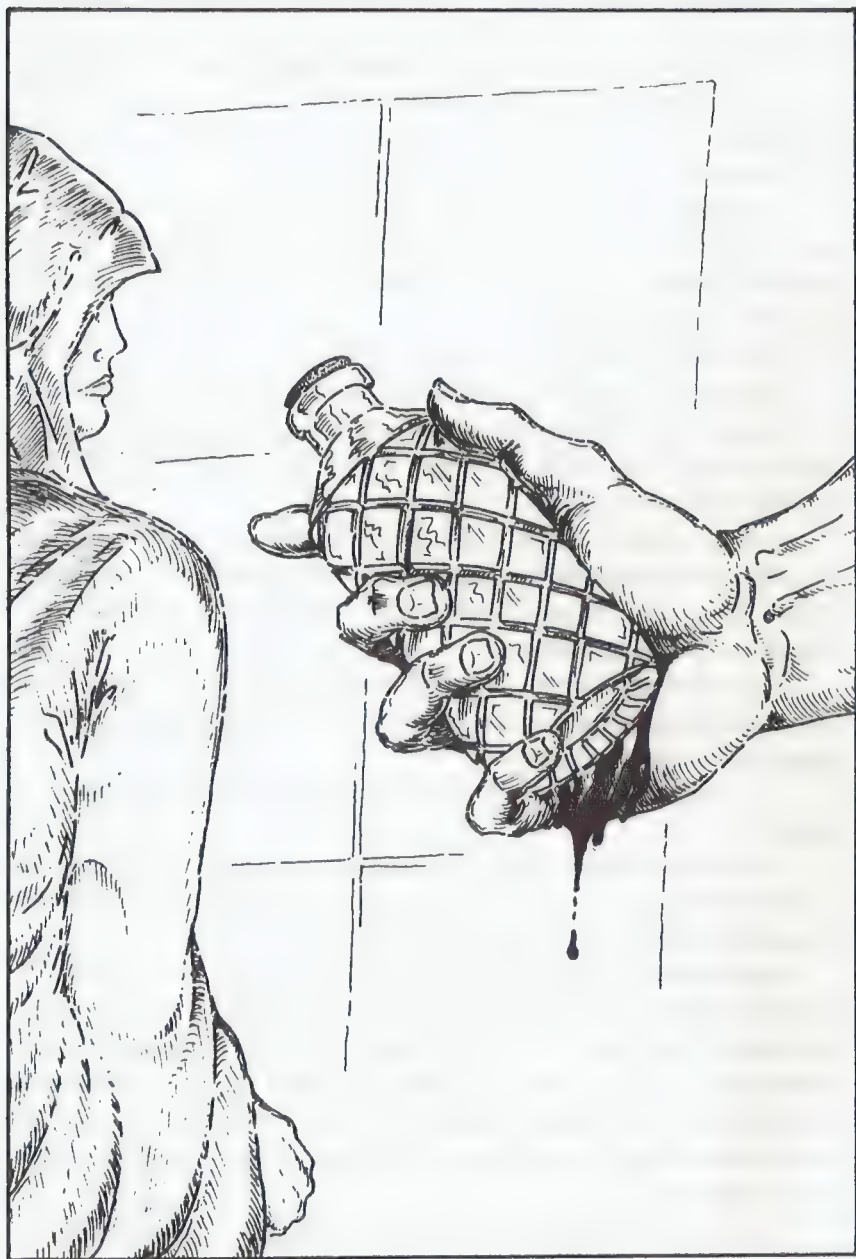
"Huh?" The sheriff looked stunned. "What are you doing? A zipper?!!"

The owner's eyes were aflame with contempt. "Do you really think I could afford all the permits and the hassle with the Humane Society to actually own a real, honest-to-goodness..."

My hysteria cut him off. "Suit?" I babbled. "A gorilla suit!?" I dropped down to the cold ground and tore at the ape's throat. I ripped the mask away. Dark, oriental eyes stared up at me, bringing it all back home in a flash - the stench of cordite and jungle rot and human waste set afire, a sea of countless teenaged faces grown prematurely old, and the sounds of sucking chest wounds and late-60s rock & roll on a cheap transistor radio.

But most of all, the gunshot crack of shattered spines in the dead of night.





THE WAITING

By Dorothy Whitman

She hadn't meant to wait so long.

"Damn, where be that toad?" She pushed up her long grey sleeve and thrust her hand into the muck. The sound of the thick mud slopped through the air. Strands of brown hair fell from the deep hood. It was thick hair, with a springiness that sung in the air of twenty summers and gave no betrayal of her true age. Time had stood still for her.

"Got to be here...ah...yea devil!" The last utterance was a cheerful curse; she pulled a squirming toad from the black muck. "Got yea!" A laugh and then, "Yea'd no thing to fear of me laddie. I'd even bath yea proper. It's just that I'd be needing yea oils. No harm'll be yea." The toad stopped squirming and croaked in reply.

"Yes, well, I know it'd been a while, but I'd been busy, what with the solstice, and all the travelers..." She tucked the frog into a flat bottomed pouch with her slender fingers and kept the rest of her words to herself. She was contented with this life of guiding others. She'd learned the ways well, as if born to it.

The toad settled in to share the pouch with other objects of her search, a lizard skin, ant dung wrapped in whorl bark, seeds from a coot berry, and several small green stones. She was nearly done. The sun was low, nearly down.

She could smell the man long before she reached her house. She hadn't expected a visitor and she was suddenly wary. The sweet smell of lathers and man-scents came first, followed by the sweat of long travel. There was a hint of something familiar, strange. She walked up behind him.

The man was dressed in hunting clothes, as fine a suit as you might buy. Though looking closer, she could see it'd been tailored to fit his stealth and muscle. He wore a long cap and she could not judge his age from the back, only his power and...then...the memories flooded back, aching and twisting.

She pulled her head back into the hood, so as a shadow might hide her face. She desperately wanted to escape his memory, never have him know. This job! The old hurt burned. She took a breath, slowed down.

"Yea'll not find what yea seek in my garden," she said. "Nor are yea likely to find it in my house." She let her accent run thick and slurred. The man turned to face her. He saw only the cloaked form, still and poised. His green eyes tried to pierce the shadows looking for a face, a sign. He could not break through.

"I've lost my way. Lost my party. If you could direct me...perhaps..." He pulled his cap off. His hair was thinning, a brown softened by the years to grays. He had wrinkles about his eyes and forehead. He had the same crooked smile though and it stung her just to look at it, to think of kissing it.

"There's no need of pretenses among me. I know what yea'd come for. It drips from yer being like the smell of danger. Yea seek the immortality." She paused, waiting to see if he'd flinch, or if the hood and accent had hid her. When he didn't react, she continued. "But for the weariness of yea, I've bread and wine. Follow me." Silently he followed her into the house.

The walls were hung with all mentions of aromatics and the house smelt of a green spring day. Her life was so different from the life she'd led then, the servants, the gowns, the sheer wealth. She went to her cupboard and drew him wine and the brown bread. He sat at the table waiting, watching. When she brought his food he grabbed her fine white hand with a perceptive power.

"I've come a long way to find you. They say it's a lasting magic that only you can do." He paused, still holding her hand, not recognizing her. "Can you do it?" Something in him shifted. Suddenly he reached for her hood with the other hand, but she slapped it away with a burning blow made of fire and sparks. He pulled back. *What do I want?* His face darkened as he eyed her apprehensively.

"Yea may be sorry yea'd ever came here," she answered in a whisper. She moved to sit across from him in the shadows and watch him eat. He'd not changed much. He hunkered down over his meal.

"It's true what they say of me. And yea seekers always come thinking your life will change somehow by the magic. It won't. Yea'll be the same jumble of memories and feelings yea walked in here with, and yea'll leave no more enlightened than my toad. It's the lure of

immortality to be sure, but are yea willing to pay the price?" She left him with the question hanging in the air.

She set her house right, putting things where they belonged. The hood stayed, shadowing her smooth face. The toad went into a small airy cage. Her other findings nestled in small boxes and canisters. She closed the windows and lit the lanterns, filling the room in orange soft light. Would he be strong enough? Few were. The journey would test his worthiness for the gift of endless life.

He finished eating in silence and then went to the wash bowl. He poured the water into the bowl, dipped his hands, and ran them over his round face, cleaning off the travel. She watched him now, thinking back to the other time she had lain in his bed watching him wash. He dried himself looking in the mirror, turning his head from side to side.

"Sit," she said, wanting to get on with it, choking on what she knew she must do.

"Yea know what yea want, but yea may not know what yea'll give to get it. First a hundred golds. Second yea'll share each of my memories and each memory of those who'd taken the magic before yea. Third yea'll share every part of yeaself with me and the others whose memories I've stored and then know how'd they'd judged yea. That's usually the hardest part. If yea can face them yea'll come out the other side, and unless we will it different, you'll live forever."

She let the last of her words ring out without any accent to see if he would recognized her voice. She saw no sign of recognition.

He picked up one of her small greenish stones, flipping it over and over in his fingers. The silence of the room grew, drawing him out. "... I've waited for so long to understand. I've given up hope. But perhaps if I live longer, I can find a way to love." He paused, looking down at the oddly familiar stone.

"I can't know what yea expect, but there is one other thing. I cannot interfere or guide yea in any way. Yea must do it all on yer own. These are the rules I'd bound meself to." Her face seemed to sink even deeper into the grey hood. The hurt when he left her long ago had been almost too much to bear.

He laid a heavy bag on the table between them. "Alright then it's begun," he said with a finality.

She walked over to her work table and drew up one of the vials. It was cut glass catching the orange light in bursts. It was filled with a violet liquid, the color of velvet flowers in the spring dew. She placed it on the table in front of him.

"Drink it," she said. He looked at her, searching again.

"Can I see your face?" he asked with a puzzled tone.

"When yea'd come out the other side," she answered, drawing back from the table.

He picked up the vial and the edges of the glass cut into his hand, so sharp they were. Small drops of blood dripped to the clean table. He pulled the stopper out and poured the liquid down his throat. Small red drops fell from his still-bleeding hand to his throat.

It was a sharing to be sure, but not just the memory but the actual life. He felt hurt, her hurt. He laughed with her laughter, the joy burst from him. He felt her thrill at meeting him, kissing him that first time. He felt the passion in her as they made love, and the tearing each time they parted. Then he was ravaged by the agony when he left her finally, suddenly, not sure of what he wanted, where he was going.

He felt her bitter loneliness, to have loved and the emptiness when he left. He was pulled through this emptiness by the love she had given him so long ago, the love he finally understood now. Her whole life, she'd loved no other.

Then the lives of the scores of other travelers to immortality shared through him. The force of it strained him, pulling him apart, bursting his heart with life.

Now it was *his* life that played out for them, sharing all he was. He grew ashamed at the shallowness of his life, the others he'd left, never loved, the children he'd never had. His life was so empty, yet filled with worldly passions.

The judging was blows of anger. Who better to judge him than those who had taken the violet liquid themselves? Every accusation was a mighty hurt. He felt himself slipping as his body screamed and thrashed with the pain. He was falling apart in the darkness when she came in a web of loving to hold him together through the pain. She had transgressed the boundaries, broken her vows. In her love she made the ultimate sacrifice.

Finally he reached the end. The agony cut through him, wrenching him in its force. He lost touch with reality in the black of torment.

He awoke to find himself on her bed. He went to her mirror. He looked at his hands, his face, his hair. He was young as the day they'd met.

She sat by the open window, bathed in the light of the morning, her cloak still drawn. Filled with the love from her memories, warmed, alive, he approached her. He put his hand gently on her back. He'd never meant to hurt her. He hadn't known what love was. He'd forgotten her, and now he's found her.

She turned to face him. Her grey hood fell to her shoulders. A cloud of white hair circled her face. It was old, older than the trees, older than the sky.

He gasped.

"I gave my life for you," she said. "I hadn't meant to wait so long to love again." Her face was growing older by the second. "Yesterday I was the same as when you'd left me....but I helped you through... so I had to give it up...the punishment is so swift. I wasn't supposed to care..." She hunched over, shriveling before his eyes.

"I love you," she said, as she crumpled to dust on the bench by the window. "I waited too long..." the wind whispered.



